

The old tradition
and
the new

by

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By Prof. Willis J. Beecher, Auburn Seminary

The substance of this treatise appeared as an article in THE CONGREGATIONALIST of March 7. It is republished in response to requests. A considerable portion which was omitted for lack of space when the article was first printed is now restored, making the argument complete, as it came from the writer.

THE OLD TRADITION AND THE NEW

In a publication of the year 1902 may be found the four paragraphs, defining the issues at stake between the older orthodoxy and the type of Higher Criticism now currently denominated the Modern View. I do not name the author because I prefer to treat the publication as representative rather than personal. The ability displayed in it entitles it to be so treated. Many statements of like character have appeared; this is one of particular excellence, chosen from among the many.

“And what are these two methods? That of the Higher Criticism is—that the Bible shall be interpreted by a devout study of its various parts with all the light that can be thrown upon it from all sources. Its concrete purpose is to ascertain its full and exact history. It has no theory of inspiration; it simply investigates, and reports what it finds.

“The method of the other side is based on an unquestioning assent to the Bible as a miraculously inspired book, every word literally true, every event historical, without myth or legend—infallible—the whole being the product of the direct inspiration of God and therefore equally authoritative in all its parts. Such and so unlike are the two methods.”

“The two methods cannot be mingled; each excludes the other by its definition of itself. If either side crosses the dividing line in order to make exceptions, the issue between them dies out and debate ceases for lack of a question.”

“It should be enough to dispel all doubts and fears over this subject that almost the whole body of educated teachers in our colleges and theological seminaries, as well as those in Great Britain, accept the Higher Criticism in its main points. . . . If this vast body of men are regarded as self-deceived and mistaken in conclusions which they have reached through close and conscientious scrutiny, the question may well be raised whether those who doubt them are sane.”

The first of these four paragraphs, as here arranged, defines the position of the Higher Criticism; the second defines the position of the old orthodoxy; the third affirms that we must all necessarily take one or the other of these two positions; the fourth gives a reason, affirmed to be sufficient, why we should prefer the position of the Higher Criticism.

I. The definition of the Higher Criticism here given is a definition of an ideal. No well read man would say that it is true of all higher critics now living. There are higher critics and higher critics.

The cited passage says that the higher critics practice “a devout study” of the Scriptures.

Their opponents take pleasure in testifying that there are devout higher critics among the advocates of the Modern View. Many of them are devout in a strictly theistic sense. Others are devout in the sense in which an atheist may be devout. Still others are distinctly and avowedly not devout. It is not probable that those who are Christianly devout would for a moment think of claiming that they constitute a majority.

Again, the cited passage says that the Higher Criticism studies the Bible "with all the light that can be thrown upon it from all sources." The one principal objection made to the prevalent Higher Criticism by its opponents is that it refuses to do just this thing. Their objection is not that it refuses to accept their theory of inspiration, but that it refuses to use "all the light . . . from all sources." Their view is that to an irrational degree it rejects testimony, particularly the testimony of the Bible itself, and that in the same irrational manner it accepts mere conjecture in the place of evidence.

The passage asserts that the Higher Criticism "has no theory of inspiration." This may be true of the Higher Criticism, but it

certainly is not true of the higher critics. Some of them are silent on the subject; but a good many seek to reassure their opponents by affirming that the Bible has an inspiration that renders it unique; while others, probably the majority, treat the Biblical claims to unique inspiration as mere fable, and make this presupposition basal in their investigations. The theory that the Scriptures are false in claiming to be inspired is just as really a theory of inspiration as is the theory that they are inspired. As a matter of fact the published works of the scholars of the Modern View are as much affected by the opinions their authors hold concerning inspiration as are the published works of the older orthodoxy.

Once more, the cited passage says that the Higher Criticism "simply investigates, and reports what it finds." It does not confine its report, however, to matters of fact as distinguished from philosophy or doctrine. Higher critics of reputation report that they find the doctrines heretofore held by Christians to be either groundless or positively false in such matters as the incarnation, the birth of Jesus, his miracles, his resurrection, his atonement, his mediatorial character, many of his specific

teachings, a large part of his biography, the personal Holy Spirit, the individual interest taken by God in his creatures. If any one thinks that this is too sweeping a statement of the case, let him take a full course of reading in the *Encyclopedia Biblica*, or in other works of that stripe. After that, let him ask himself: Provided these men are correct, can we be sure that even the peerless humanity of Jesus is anything more than a figment of the imagination? Provided they are correct, is the fatherhood of God anything else than a figure of speech?

Some one will reply that it is not fair to charge higher critics indiscriminately with the teaching of such doctrines as these. Of course it is not; that is the point I wish to make. And it is equally unfair to credit them indiscriminately with a fine devotedness to evangelical doctrine. If the higher critics who love the gospel will persist in ranging themselves with those who deny every teaching of the gospel, they can hardly blame others for following the same classification. The higher critics who reject virtually the entire range of distinctive Christian teaching are neither few nor inconspicuous nor reticent. They claim

that this rejection is the logical result of the principles of Higher Criticism accepted in the Modern View. In making this claim they are immensely in the majority; for in this point all the Christian opponents of the Modern View agree with them, and the avowed enemies of Christianity agree with them. In denying that these conclusions properly result from the premises with which they start, the gospel-loving higher critics are a relatively small minority. This is the case as it stands: An influential portion of the scholars of the Modern View repudiate most of the great truths of Christianity, as these have hitherto been understood; the present trend of the Modern View is strongly in this direction; and nowhere among the scholars of the Modern View is there an expression of any but the mildest opposition to it.

II. In the passage cited it is affirmed that "the method of the other side is based on an unquestioning assent to the Bible as a miraculously inspired book." "Unquestioning assent" has come to be an ambiguous term. It is one thing to demand unquestioning assent before investigation, and quite another to demand it as a result of investigation. The term may be

applied, though not felicitously, to the attitude of one who unhesitatingly clings to the convictions he has reached through investigation. It is only in this sense that it truthfully describes the Protestant orthodox doctrine concerning the Scriptures. At least the common doctrine of American Protestant scholars has not been that we are to believe the Scriptures unquestioningly without investigating their claims, but that we are first to investigate, and then, if we find them to be the Word of God, accord to them the credence to which that fact entitles them.

Again, the cited passage says that the older view of the Bible counts "every word literally true, every event historical." Here again is an ambiguity of terms. If by "literally true" one means thoroughly true in their own proper meaning, then certainly the older tradition counts all parts of the Bible as literally true; but it has never taught that they were literally true in the sense of wholly excluding figure of speech or fiction. Doubtless it has been too restricted in its recognition of fiction, but in its most rigid construction it has recognized at least the parables of Jesus and the fables of Jotham and Jehoash, with other instances that

were at least open. It is even true that the most glaring excrescences of the older tradition, namely, its allegorical interpretations and some of its spiritualizing interpretations, have been along the line of an undue recognition of fictional elements.

It is doubtless true that the older tradition has been narrow and inadequate in its literary theory of the Scriptures. It has been too much dominated by the idea that the supernatural is the unnatural, too ready to interpret marvels into the Scriptures, too open to the suggestion that faith deserves credit for giving credence to the incredible. And if this is true of the old tradition itself, it is also true that among its thousands of advocates some have been included who were not well balanced, and from whose writings a collection of absurdities might be gathered. There is a wide range of difference of opinion among the advocates of the older tradition as among the advocates of the Modern View; but no merely mechanical doctrine of inerrancy has ever been the prevailing doctrine.

There are a great many of us, opposed to the so-called Modern View, who experience no sensation as of one looking into a mirror,

when we read such a passage as the one that has been cited. Indeed, we are so presumptuous as to claim that we are trying to interpret the Bible "by a devout study of its various parts with all the light that can be thrown upon it from all sources;" and that our "concrete purpose is to ascertain its full and exact history." At the outset of an investigation we do not assume it to be a fact that the Bible is uniquely inspired; but we equally avoid the assumption that it is not so inspired. We do not assume it to be a fact that the statements of the Bible are all thoroughly truthful, but we also avoid assuming that they are untruthful. We are ready to recognize elements of fiction in the Bible to any extent to which the evidence actually shows that they are there. We are aware that fiction, whether in the form of parable, fable, allegory, poem, myth or legend, may be as truthful in its own proper meaning as fact can be, and may teach the same spiritual lessons which it would teach if it were fact. But we insist that questions of this kind shall be decided upon evidence and not according to the exigencies of some preconceived theory. And in dealing with the evidence we insist that the testimony of the Bible on any point shall be examined before it is rejected.

We are ready to accept evolution as a fact to the extent to which it is proven to be a fact. Beyond that, we are willing to accept it as a working hypothesis up to the point where it comes into conflict with facts. Our belief that the supreme energy of the universe is a personal God does not preclude our accepting evolution as a method in which the personal God ordinarily works. But we do not believe that Jehovah is the slave of evolution any more than that Jupiter is the slave of the fates.

We try to deal with the miraculous elements in the Bible on the basis of the fair weighing of evidence. Past generations have shown a disposition to interpret marvels into the Scriptures. We are willing to part with all supposed miraculous elements that can fairly be eliminated by just interpretation or explanation or any other process consistent with the evidence in the case. But we insist that some one's notion that God never works a miracle is not by itself a sufficient reason for declaring accredited testimony to be false.

In fine, the question of method that separates us from the higher critics of the Modern View is the question as to how testimony is to be regarded. We affirm that in the beginnings of

an investigation statements of fact are to be provisionally received as true, except as there exist reasons for not so receiving them; and that, as the investigation proceeds, these provisional results are to be finally accepted save in so far as reasons may appear for rejecting or modifying them, or for holding them open. This differs from the rule sometimes attributed to us, namely, that Biblical statements of fact are to be accepted unless they are positively disproved. At the outset we make no difference between Biblical statements of fact and other statements of fact.

I do not know to what extent the higher critics of the Modern View would dispute the rule for testimony, as I have stated it. It is not easy to see how any one can dispute it. But if they accept the rule, their procedure under it is very different from ours. They have among them an established tradition of some hundreds or thousands of instances of false statements in the Old and New Testaments. It seems to us that they accept these instances without due scrutiny. The accepting of them creates in the mind the impression that other statements of fact from the same sources are likely to be untrustworthy; and so their dis-

regard of the Biblical testimony grows as they proceed in their investigations. We, on the contrary, examine each of the alleged instances before rejecting it, with the result that most of the instances at once disappear, and our confidence in the Bible testimony grows as we proceed. As our courses diverge, we are compelled to regard theirs as unscientific and misleading and disastrous. As for us, we reach at length a position where we are able to affirm with conviction the propositions which we waived at the outset, namely the thorough truthfulness and the unique divine inspiration of the Scriptures, and therefore the authoritative character of their teachings.

Our differences with the men of the Modern View are not merely or mainly over their destructive criticism. If they closed their labors with the completion of the destructive work, they and we might still agree concerning the contents of the Biblical narrative as it has been handed down to us. We might understand the story alike, and learn from it the same spiritual lessons, though they would affirm that much of it is not fact, and that we have no means of knowing what the actual facts were. But they are not content to leave

the matter thus. Having completed their work of destruction, they must needs reconstruct the history. Rejecting half the facts as affirmed in the testimony, both those that outline the history and those that concern its details, they are compelled to substitute slenderly drawn inferences and analogies, or mere conjectures, thus building up a new account, utterly irreconcilable with the old, of the origin and progress of the religion of Jehovah. This new account—or rather, these new accounts, for each critic has his own view of the reconstructed history—are confessedly without any adequate basis of facts. Really, each of them is a work of fiction, presenting its author's idea of the way in which certain things presumably evolved themselves. For my own part, if I agreed with these writers in thinking that the Biblical version of the history is untrue to fact, I should still immensely prefer the ancient fiction in the case to any of the modern fictions. And when these recent works of fiction, with their confessed lack of foundation in fact, claim to be received as historical, to the superseding of the history as given in the Old and New Testaments, this seems to many of us more objectionable than even the destructive criticism that preceded.

III. The passages that have been cited affirm that "the two methods cannot be mingled," that "if either side crosses the dividing line . . . , the issue between them dies out and debate ceases for lack of a question." Whatever this may mean, it is uncritical. The proper question to ask is not, "Which side is true?" but, "What is the truth in the case?" The ceasing of debate is not a calamity, provided the debate ceases because the question is solved.

In its context this statement that the two methods cannot be mingled seems to be given as a reason why we should not flinch even when the conclusions of the Higher Criticism become startling and shocking. The reasoning seems to be that there are just these two positions to take and no others, so that the only thing to do is to choose one of the two paths and then follow it, no matter where it leads.

Instead of this, I should like to advocate a different alignment of the issues involved. The problem is not one of those in which a simple affirmative and a simple negative constitute an exhaustive list of possible mental attitudes. As a matter of fact, it is possible to choose among many different positions.

I am afraid that the four paragraphs I have

cited are not entirely mistaken in the description they give of the existing attitude of certain Christian scholars. I am afraid that the division into parties is partly along the lines there indicated. But I believe that attitude to be a forced and unnatural one. I believe that the present party division on these issues is one that separates men who ought to be together, and brings into alliance men whose real views are antagonistic. To be more specific, Christendom is to-day full of thinking men who reject the older teachings concerning the Scriptures, but who are not ready to take an agnostic position concerning written revelation and miracle and prayer and the personal Holy Spirit and the person of Jesus. In using this term I recognize the truth that an agnostic position is the only true position in regard to things that we really cannot know. If one is indeed convinced of the unreality of revelation from God, and of miracle, and of communication with God in prayer, and of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as Christianity has hitherto presented these, then he ought to be an agnostic on these points, and ought to deem the name an honor, and not a reproach. What I am saying is that many who are not agnostic in their convictions

are at present allowing themselves to be lined up with the agnostics in the attack upon old-fashioned orthodoxy. Their influence is on the side of agnosticism, while really their differences with agnosticism, are far more important than their differences with orthodoxy. The attitude is an abnormal one, and they ought not to consent to remain in it.

Here is a higher critic who is also a man of earnest convictions as a Christian. He believes in a heavenly Father who is personal in such a sense that a praying soul can have real communication with him. He believes in a divine Holy Spirit everywhere influencing men for holiness. All his hope centers in the person of Jesus. Perhaps he is a Trinitarian, accepting the doctrine that Jesus Christ is at once very God and very man. At all events, he honors and loves Christ as supreme Lord. He counts Jesus as peerless among men. He regards the teachings of Jesus as both intellectually and morally worthy of the highest reverence. He regards the Scriptures as in some genuine sense the inspired word of God, containing a revelation of certain divine redemptive movements, in the centuries before Jesus and in the time when Jesus lived. And

he believes these truths to be so important that the great duty of Christendom is to learn them and live them and teach them to all the nations. But this same higher critic finds himself in line with others in the midst of a great conflict that is going on. He is convinced that certain older forms of teaching these doctrines that he loves are crude and mistaken. In particular, he objects to certain views concerning the Scriptures as the record of these doctrines. On the side opposed to him, therefore, he sees the men who represent the older orthodoxy. Side by side with him, as allies in this battle, he finds men of all shades of opinion concerning these religious truths which he regards as so real and so precious. Among them are very many leaders who despise the things that seem to him to be religious truths, deeming them to be illusions, and commiserating him as a man half emancipated; and the trend is strongly to the following of these leaders. What ought this higher critic to do in the circumstances? Is it sufficient for him mildly to remark that personally he thinks these leaders a little extreme in the positions they take? Does he regard the overthrow of the old-fashioned views of the Scriptures as

so supremely important that he is willing, for that end, to bind himself to the silence that gives consent, while his allies flout the religious ideas that seem to him the most true and precious?

When King Ahaz, contrary to the advice of the prophet, formed an alliance with Assyria against his brethren of the northern kingdom, he made the supreme mistake of Judaite political history. His policy led to the utter subjugation of Judah. Now, as then, it is perilous for any of the tribes of Israel to be in alliance with the Assyrians.

The difference of method, our difference with this class of higher critics, is important. But it is insignificant compared with that which separates the higher critic who accepts the Jesus of the Gospels as supreme Lord from the other higher critic who regards Jesus as a rather remarkable man, born no one knows where, who somehow became the focus of the imagination of the generations that followed him, thus giving rise to that mass of legendary narrative, half of it incredible and the other half but partly true, now known as the four Gospels. Is it too much to ask that the first of these two higher critics shall be outspoken in

the matters in which he differs with the second? This matter in which he agrees essentially with the men of the older tradition is far more important than the matters in which he disagrees with them. Is he loyal to his convictions if he without protest simply stands by his agnostic ally? Surely there ought to be here a new alignment of forces.

The men who are opposed to unreasonable agnosticism should present a united front. Much of the current Higher Criticism is balefully agnostic. Protests against it should be met with welcome and cooperation by reasonable higher critics. Reasonable higher critics should not say: We must stand by our allies; we cannot cross the line to make exceptions.

The task thus assigned to the reasonable higher critics has its difficulties. It puts upon them the burden of refuting the claim that the agnostic conclusions follow necessarily from principles which they themselves accept—the burden of so defining their principles of Higher Criticism as to exclude the agnostic conclusions. Of course, I think the task an impossible one. But the attempt would be in many ways salutary. And in any case the higher critic who refuses to become an agnostic is bound to justify his course.

It is easy to say that the personality of Jesus is the great thing in the New Testament and that it is therefore of no particular importance if the men of the New Testament were mistaken in many of their opinions and in many of their statements of fact. I do not now care to discuss this further than to say that if their errors are sufficiently extensive to vitiate their testimony concerning the personality of Jesus, then the matter becomes of the utmost importance. Independent of the New Testament we have no adequate knowledge of the personality of Jesus. Distinguished higher critics affirm that the accounts of the virgin birth, the rising from the dead, the ascension are fables; that either the account of the death of Jesus or else the several accounts of his interviews with men after his death are untrue; that the passages in Matthew and Luke in which he is represented as speaking in detail of the destruction of Jerusalem were written after that event, thus proving the late date of these gospels, and proving also that they are mistaken in attributing these sayings to Jesus; that the account of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and all accounts which imply that there was at that time a city called Nazareth are untrue to fact;

that the account of the sermon on the mount is a make-up, the so-called sermon being a piecing together of some one's recollection of various teachings uttered at various times; that the accounts of the temptation and the various accounts of the miracles of Jesus are colored by the imagination of later generations.

I suppose that not less than half the statements made in the four Gospels concerning Jesus are thus discredited, and this of course implies the diminishing of the credit of all the statements that remain. This is done by leaders among the higher critics and there is no clear, emphatic repudiation of it by the remaining higher critics. But if one to this extent discredits the gospels, can we afterward depend upon their presentation of the personality of Jesus as being true to fact? I have no doubt that the personality of Jesus is a living reality to some who hold these views; but it is so as the product of their religious insight, and at the cost of their intellectual inconsistency.

Further, it is easy to say that Jesus himself affirms that there are limitations to his knowledge, and therefore that our high estimate of him need not suffer even if he honestly

affirmed some things that we now know to be contrary to fact. Here, as in the preceding instance, I do not care to discuss the general proposition. The question is not concerning some supposable limitations of the inerrancy either of the Scriptures or of Jesus; it is concerning the limitations that are actually attributed to them. Distinguished writers affirm that Jesus taught wrong views concerning the history of his nation, concerning Moses and the institutions of Israel, concerning Moses as a writer, concerning David and the Psalms, concerning his own descent from David, concerning the powers of healing he exercised, concerning prediction by the ancient prophets, concerning his second coming, concerning his resurrection, concerning the supernatural authority of Scripture, concerning many other matters, in fine, that a large percentage of his most important teachings are contrary to the truth. They claim that it is the part of true friendship for Jesus to admit that he was thus mistaken in a large part of the range of his teaching, saying that he could not be expected to be so far in advance of his age as to avoid these mistakes. Now when a man tells me that he thus discounts the statements of

Jesus, say thirty per cent., and in the same breath tells me that he bows in reverence before the intellectual and moral peerlessness of Jesus, I do not doubt his sincerity, but I think he is more likely than Jesus to be the mistaken man. For most men the peerlessness of Jesus is gone if they get to thinking that he was either so weak-minded or so careless as to be a good deal in the habit of making assertions that he did not know to be true.

If the men who believe in the reality of Jesus as he is accepted in Christian experience would be outspoken in their opposition to those who teach the contrary, and would so define their critical attitude as to justify their belief, there would be a tremendous realignment of the forces now engaged in the battles of criticism.

IV. The reason given in the passages cited for having no "doubts and fears" concerning the Higher Criticism is that it is accepted "in its main points" in the United States and Great Britain by "almost the whole body of educated teachers in our colleges and theological seminaries." This is an overstatement, though it is nearer to the truth than I wish it were. Those of us who do not accept the

Modern View are not so utterly lonesome as many seem to imagine.

So far forth as this consensus among men who occupy educational positions is a fact, the fact is largely to be accounted for by the splendid skill with which the men of the Modern View have managed their propaganda, and largely by the phenomenal blundering of their opponents.

The nature of the consensus is not precisely that which one might at first imagine. What are these "main points" on which all these scholars agree? Answer this question specifically and you will greatly diminish the significance of the agreement. Further, there is no point in which the existing consensus is more uniform than in this: that the opinions held ten years hence will probably be very different from those now held. A consensus in regard to matters that are known to be fluctuating differs from a final consensus.

But even if the consensus were less tentative in its character, and if there were not these ways of accounting for a part of it, and if it were more nearly unanimous than it is, we of the opposition could not consent to be so uncritical as to accept it as conclusive. The

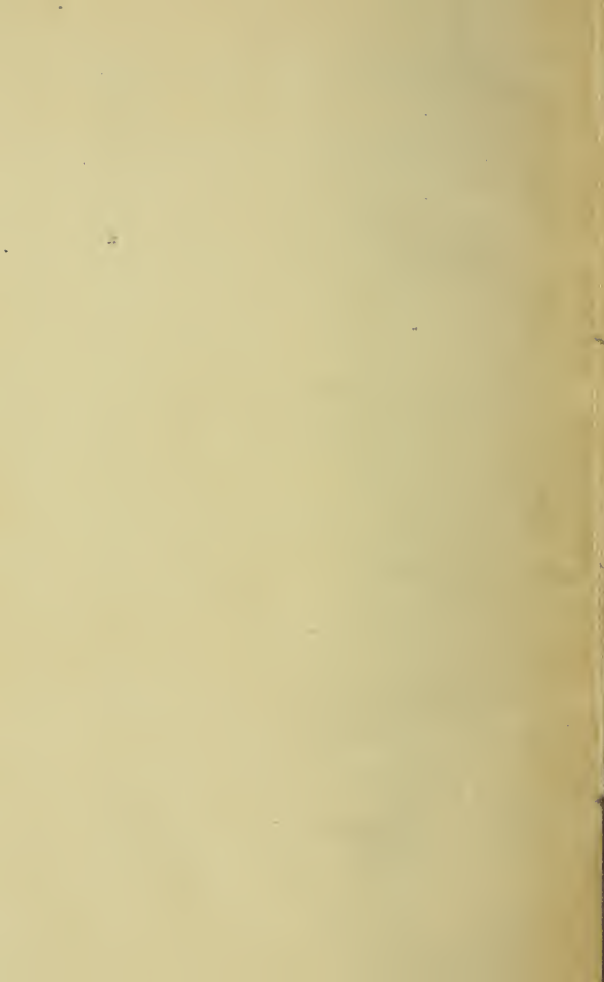
knowledge of truth depends upon evidence, and not upon majority votes. The opinion of respected men has its own proper value as evidence, and no more. The consensus in the American and British colleges and seminaries was more complete fifty years ago than it is now. That consensus does not prove that the views then held were true; and this consensus does not prove that the very different views now held are true.

On the whole, we may venture to disregard this consensus in points in which the evidence seems to us to be against it.

But if we do this, says the cited passage, "the question may well be raised whether" we "are sane." That is really frightful. Of course one would prefer not to be considered insane. But we do hold that conclusions should be based on evidence rather than on a current fashion of opinion. If this is a mark of insanity we shall have to plead guilty. We take comfort in contemplating certain earlier instances of alleged insanity of this type, the cases of Jeremiah and of Jesus, for example. And inasmuch as the specific delusion charged upon us consists in our being confident that the Scriptures are truthful and inspired, we

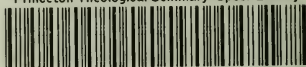
take comfort in reflecting that we share that delusion with nearly all the men who have heretofore made the religion of the Scriptures the greatest blessing the world ever had. On the basis of the rule, "By their fruits ye shall know them," we can afford to compare our views with the views of our opponents.

Fully conscious that the theories of the past need improvement; acknowledging that the present revolution is in part a revolt against wrong ideas and methods; appreciating the great light from exploration, and the greater light from linguistic studies which have arisen within the past sixty years; recognizing the good work which literary criticism has done at many points; holding our minds open to every tested discovery of truth from every source; we are yet certain that there will be no final settlement of Biblical questions on the basis of the higher criticism that is now commonly called by that name. Many specific teachings of the system will doubtless abide. But so far forth as it goes upon the assumption that statements of fact in the Scriptures are pretty generally false, so far forth it is incapable of establishing genuinely permanent results.



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